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Statement by U.S. Rep. Frank R. Wolf
Report of a Visit to Algeria and Egypt
A Human Rights Perspective
July 5 -10, 1998

This report provides details of my trip to northern Africa during the period July 5-10, 1998. This visit included a two-day stop in Algiers (July 6-8) followed by a two-day visit to Cairo (July 8-10). The relatively short traveling time between Algiers and Cairo afforded the opportunity for back-to-back visits. Algeria is rampant with terrorism which is largely unreported to the outside world. Nearby Cairo afforded the opportunity to meet with and see in their homeland Coptic Christians and to develop a broader perspective of human rights conditions there.

I have, for several years, followed events in Algeria and have a growing concern about the terrible toll on human life that ongoing, unabated terrorism and the government's response to it are having in this violent land.

Algeria has deep roots in history. Saint Augustine (354-430), one of the greatest leaders of the early Christian Church and the author of *Confessions*, one of the first great autobiographies, was born in the city of Tagaste, near what is now Constantine, in the northeast corner of Algeria.

In 1815, a U.S. Naval Squadron under Captain Stephen Decatur attacked Algiers and forced its governor to sign a treaty banning piracy against American ships. Continuing piracy on European shipping led ultimately to the French invasion of Algiers in 1830 and the occupation of Algeria which continued for more than 130 years until 1962.

During eight years of intense fighting with the French immediately before winning independence in 1962, Algeria paid a terrible price. It has been said that one million people were killed and two million lost their homes. An independent nation emerged with no infrastructure and no skilled labor force to keep the country running. Various experiments in governance followed. But it wasn't until the collapse of oil prices in the late 1980s on which Algeria's economy was largely based and the

disappearance of Soviet influence and support that a movement toward democracy and a free-market economy took shape.

Beginning in 1989, legitimate opposition to the government in power emerged under a new constitution. Municipal elections were held in 1992 and the opposition Islamic Salvation Front (FIS) won a large majority. The military quickly intervened, canceled the elections, imposed a state of emergency and outlawed the FIS. The government justified its actions on two fronts: the need to prevent the FIS from overthrowing the government and imposing an Islamic state, and the existence of the FIS contravened a law on political parties stipulating that no party can be based upon religion.

The move toward democracy was put on hold. Leaders and members of FIS were targeted, imprisoned and punished by the government. In response, terrorist bands began to form and violence and killing in Algeria escalated. These bands continue to wreak fear and death on the country and its people. Several sources said that some of these Algerian terrorists were trained to fight in Afghanistan against the Soviet army and were called Mujahideen. As many as 70,000 people have been killed by terrorists since 1992. Many more have been injured and the toll continues to grow. Ten people were killed and 21 were injured in a terrorist bombing in Algiers the day we departed on July 8.

While in Algeria, we visited the tiny villages of Sidi Hamed and Sidi Rais near the town of Blida less than an hour's drive from Algiers. These villages are the sites of recent terrorist acts and massacres. Late on the night of January 10, 1998, terrorists attacked residents of Sidi Hamed and killed 103 men, women and children and wounded many more. We visited a home at the center of the massacre and spoke with the owner who lost his wife and family in the raiding and burning that took place. We met with young children who lost parents and family to that night's terrorist attack. We visited a cemetery with 103 fresh graves.

The fear that was evident in Sidi Hamed was shared by virtually all the Algerians we met. The 2,000 to 4,000 terrorists estimated to be active in Algeria are holding hostage the entire country, its people and, to a significant degree, future progress and development.

Algerians have much on which to base this fear. Terrorist groups have threatened to "slash the throats of all apostates and their allies." They have certainly made good on these threats. On May 14, 1997, for example, terrorists in the town of

Douar Daoud slaughtered more than 30 residents including two infants, 15 other children and seven women. On April 16, 1997, bodies of four young girls were found outside the village of Chaib Mohammed. They had been raped before their throats were slit. During this same period, 18 people, mostly young men, were shot or hacked to death at a phony roadblock near Saida. The largest massacre took place in Sidi Rias on August 28, 1987, when up to 300 people, many of them women and children and even small babies were killed. About 100 more were injured. This pattern of terrorism, brutality and violence continues today.

We met with a number of Algerian government officials including the prime minister, a regional governor, the speaker of the lower house and senior members of the upper body of parliament, the foreign minister, representatives of most of the major political parties and factions. We also met with representatives of human rights and terrorism watch organizations, with representatives of the Algerian press, business, student and women's groups and with a number of terrorist victims who were personally injured and/or who lost close family members.

By most accounts, incidents of terrorism have measurably declined since about 1994-95. Still, there is more than enough terrorism to instill in the people an elevated level of fear, caution and reluctance to venture out, especially after dark. Terrorists have targeted specific groups, among them members of the press, Westerners, police and government officials and other high-profile individuals. Sometimes, fake roadblocks are established by terrorists dressed as police or army members and passers-by are stopped and killed. This is most prevalent in the countryside away from Algiers.

The government and the army have been strongly criticized on two fronts. The first is for not responding quickly enough or with sufficient force to combat incidents of ongoing terrorism. While some of this criticism is justified, it is noted that Algeria has an armed force of 125,000 or less. Subtracting those in the navy and air force and the poorly equipped and trained conscripts, there are only about 25,000 regular soldiers in a country whose size approximates the United States east of the Mississippi River. Only about half of this number is mobilized at any time. It is also noteworthy that the army has been trained by and patterned after the former Soviet military, which is not known for rapid response to crises.

Criticism has also been leveled at the government for "extra-judicial" actions taken in response to terrorism or under circumstances attributed to terrorism. Frequent occasions were mentioned when government actions outside the rule of law occur. Reports have been made of several hundred apprehensions of individuals by

government and police forces where the person taken was never again heard from and family members cannot learn what happened from the government.

The Algerian government has been urged to become more “transparent” in its efforts to combat terrorism and to discipline police and military forces to work within the rule of law. Progress in this area is slow and perhaps human rights training of military units should be provided.

Unemployment is high (above 20 percent) and there is a critical shortage of sufficient housing. Improvement in these areas could reduce the numbers of young people willing to turn to terrorism. Median age of the 30 million Algerian population is 15 years. This is also the age group hardest hit by high unemployment. Privatization of government-run industries (Air Algerie, the primary airline serving Algeria, is an example) would help. Many foreign investors are doubtless reluctant to move into Algeria with the level of terrorism that exists. Efforts to drive down the killings, bombings and other acts of terror would do the most to help.

The United States is presently Algeria’s most important trading partner with 1998 exports to the U.S. projected to be \$2.2 billion (mostly hydrocarbon/petroleum industry). Imports from the U.S. in 1998 are predicted to be \$920 million. U.S. trade with Algeria is expected to continue to increase. There are tremendous business opportunities there.

There is a lack of qualified outside observers to provide commentary and conscience to heavy-handed government activities in Algeria. The permanent presence of ICRC (International Committee of the Red Cross), Amnesty International, and other human rights watch organizations would be helpful in curbing extra-legal behavior and in certifying legitimate forceful response as conditions improve. At a minimum, observers should be allowed to visit whenever they want and the government should cooperate with them.

The Algerian Parliament has recently passed legislation that imposes Arabic as the sole official language. This action resulted in strong protest by Berbers, who make up about 30 percent of Algeria’s population. Algeria has not yet found the key to democratically balancing the legitimate concerns and interests of all its minority and citizen groups.

Still, with all the fear, terrorism and sometimes massacre that are part of each day, the Algerian people are going about their daily life, working, attending school and

making a home as best they can with determination and resilience as they try to change their country. We were told that Algerian women strongly influence this balanced daily lifestyle.

From my observations while in Algeria, I offer the following recommendations:

1. Terrorism and violence taking place in Algeria should be condemned in the strongest terms by the U.S. and by all nations.
2. The government should be encouraged to invite ICRC, Amnesty International and other human rights organizations to Algeria on a permanent basis.
3. Efforts to increase international press coverage and ensure uncensored national press should be encouraged.
4. The U.S. should consider providing human rights training to Algerian military and police.
5. Ongoing labor training provided by the AFL-CIO to help union leaders cope with events as the economy is privatized should continue and perhaps increase.
6. Parliamentary exchange programs should be developed and encouraged to assist Algerian progress toward democracy. Exchange programs in other areas such as business, academia, government, medical and others should also be encouraged and supported.
7. Assistance to and education about the criminal justice system are required to strengthen safeguards and ensure that human rights are protected.
8. More housing must be constructed and help to develop the private ownership of homes is required. Organizations such as Fannie May can provide advice and information to assist in this effort.

In conclusion, I would add the comment that U.S. interests are extremely well served by our ambassador, Cameron R. Hume, and his able embassy staff who ensure we are effectively represented under always trying and sometimes dangerous conditions. They do an outstanding job and America is fortunate to have them there.

Visit to Cairo

I also visited Cairo for about two days during this trip. I met with President Mubarak and others in the government, members of the Coptic Christian community, Muslims and representatives of various human rights action and assistance groups. I was not able to visit the upper Nile where many problems regarding Coptic Christians have been reported. This is an area I would like to visit in a future trip.

Areas of human rights and religious tolerance are slowly progressing although much more could be done. About one fourth of Egypt's 65 million population lives in Cairo and huge numbers live in abject poverty. We visited one of five "garbage cities" in Cairo. These are huge garbage dumps where hordes of the poorest live and eke out an existence by sorting, selling and using garbage under indescribably horrific conditions.

Under Egyptian law, a church cannot be built without approval of the president. Until recently, this restriction also applied to existing churches being allowed to make even the most minor repairs. Although the law remains unchanged, authority to allow repairs has now been delegated to the presidentially appointed governors. It is uncertain how successful this new delegation of authority will be.

President Mubarak said that the concept of discriminating against people is not the policy of Egypt. Many Copts with whom I spoke agreed that there is little if any systematic government persecution. Still, in the course of daily life, with virtually no important government or other positions filled by Coptic Christians, interpretation of laws and regulations, judgments between Copts and other Egyptians, the meting out of routine rulings and the normal conduct of business imposes hardships and unfairness on Copts. Clearly, there are difficulties being faced by Coptic Christians. Many would agree with the statement in an Australian report on Copts in Egypt that "although the government of Egypt would like to believe that keeping silent about the issues will make them go away, it's clear the government could do more to insure the Coptic minority is treated equally."

I would also like to thank the staff at the American Embassy and particularly Ms. Molly Phee who accompanied us during our stay in Cairo. Our Foreign Service corps does an exceptional job under trying and demanding conditions.